



*The Things They Carried*

by Tim O'Brien

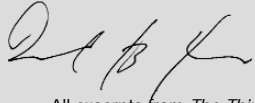
TEACHER'S RESOURCE GUIDE

THE  
AMERICAN PLACE  
THEATRE  
LITERATURE  
TO LIFE<sup>®</sup>

LITERATURE TO LIFE® is a performance-based literacy program that presents professionally staged verbatim adaptations of significant American literary works. The program gives students a new form of access to literature by bringing to life the world of the book with performances that create an atmosphere of discovery and spark the imagination. *Literature to Life* encourages reading, writing, and critical thinking and provides a catalyst for learning and self-expression.

This *Literature To Life* Teacher's Resource Guide was written by professional teaching artists with vast experience implementing effective, hands-on strategies in the classroom. It is designed for educators to introduce drama-in-education to their students, as both a pre- and post-*Literature to Life* performance guide. The activities presented meet the Learning Standards for English and the Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in the Arts. The exercises can be adapted (simplified or extended) according to the students' special needs, maturity, interests, and abilities.

Forging the connection between theatre, literature and education is no longer a privilege—it is our responsibility as educators to not only open these doors, but to charge through them with purpose and certitude.



David Kener, Executive Director  
The American Place Theatre

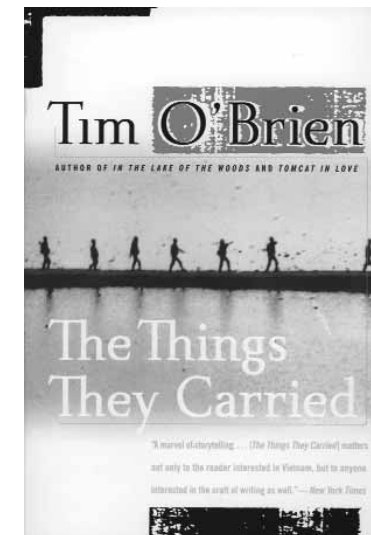
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## Theatre Etiquette

To make the theatre-going experience more enjoyable for everyone, a code of behavior has been established. When attending theatrical performances, remember these simple rules of conduct.

- Be on time for the performance.
- Do not eat, drink, or chew gum in the theatre.
- Turn off all cellular phones and pagers.
- Be sure to use the restroom BEFORE the pre-show discussion begins.
- Talk before and after the performance only. Remember that the people near you and on stage can hear you.
- Be an active participant in the pre- and post-show discussions in order to further deepen your experience with *Literature to Life*.
- Appropriate responses to the performances, such as laughing and applauding, are appreciated.
- Act with maturity during romantic, violent, and other challenging scenes.
- Do not leave after the performance, a post-show discussion will follow including a Q&A with the actor.
- Open your eyes, ears, and mind to the entire theatrical experience!



The following exercises are designed to be used BEFORE seeing the play!

## Section 1: Introduction

Overall Objective: The students will have an introduction to Tim O'Brien and *The Things They Carried*.

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### About Tim O'Brien

Objectives:

- The students will learn about Mr. O'Brien's life.
  - The students will write questions based on Mr. O'Brien's life.
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TIM O'BRIEN received the 1979 National Book Award in Fiction for *Going After Cacciato*. His novel *The Things They Carried* won France's prestigious Prix de Meilleur Livre Etranger and the Chicago Tribune Heartland Prize. His two most recent novels, *In the Lake of the Woods* and *Tomcat in Love*, were national bestsellers.

A native of Worthington, Minnesota, Tim O'Brien graduated in 1968 from Macalester College in St. Paul. He served as a foot soldier in Vietnam from 1969 to 1970, after which he pursued graduate studies in Government at Harvard University, then later worked as a national affairs reporter for the *Washington Post*. He now lives in Massachusetts.

Other books by Tim O'Brien include *If I Die in a Combat Zone Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, *Going After Cacciato*, *Northern Lights*, *The Nuclear Age*, *July, July* and *In the Lake of the Woods*. *Going After Cacciato* won the National Book Award in 1979. *In the Lake of the Woods* won the James Fenimore Cooper Prize from the society of American Historians and was selected as the best novel of 1994 by *Time* magazine.

### Exercise:

Provide each student with a copy of the biography of Tim O'Brien. After everyone has read it, discuss how Mr. O'Brien must have felt when he received his draft notice following his college graduation. How would you feel if you were in O'Brien's shoes?

As an extension, have a volunteer play Tim O'Brien and, with the help of the class, answer some of the questions on the other student's lists.

## Discussion: *The Things They Carried*

**Objective:** The students will explore the literal and figurative meanings of the title of the novel.

### Exercise:

- Explore the title *The Things They Carried*. What items would you carry if you were going off to war? Why are they important things to carry?
- What does it mean to “carry” something? Can you carry anything besides tangible objects?
- Have volunteers read the following passages out loud to the class:

*“What they carried was partly a function of rank, partly of field specialty. As a machine gunner, Henry Dobbins carried the M-60, which weighed 23 pounds unloaded, but which was almost always loaded. He also carried between 10 and 15 pounds of ammunition draped in belts across his chest and shoulders.*

*The things they carried were largely determined by necessity. Among them were P-38 can openers, pocket knives, heat tabs, wristwatches, dog tags, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, candy, cigarettes, salt tablets, packets of Kool-Aid, lighters, matches, sewing kits, Military Payment Certificates, and two or three canteens of water.*

*They carried the land itself-Vietnam, the place, the soil-powdery orange-red dust that covered their boots and fatigues and faces. They carried the sky. The whole atmosphere, they carried it, the humidity, the monsoons, the stink of fungus and decay, all of it, they carried gravity.*

*They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing—these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight. They carried shameful memories. They carried the common secret of cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or freeze or hide... They carried their reputations. They carried the soldier's greatest fear, which was the fear of blushing.”*

- Briefly discuss the differences in this passage between “literal” things that Tim O’Brien carried and “figurative/abstract/metaphorical” things that he and the other soldiers carried.

## What are you “carrying”?

**Objective:** The students will relate to the experiences of soldiers who are around their same age.

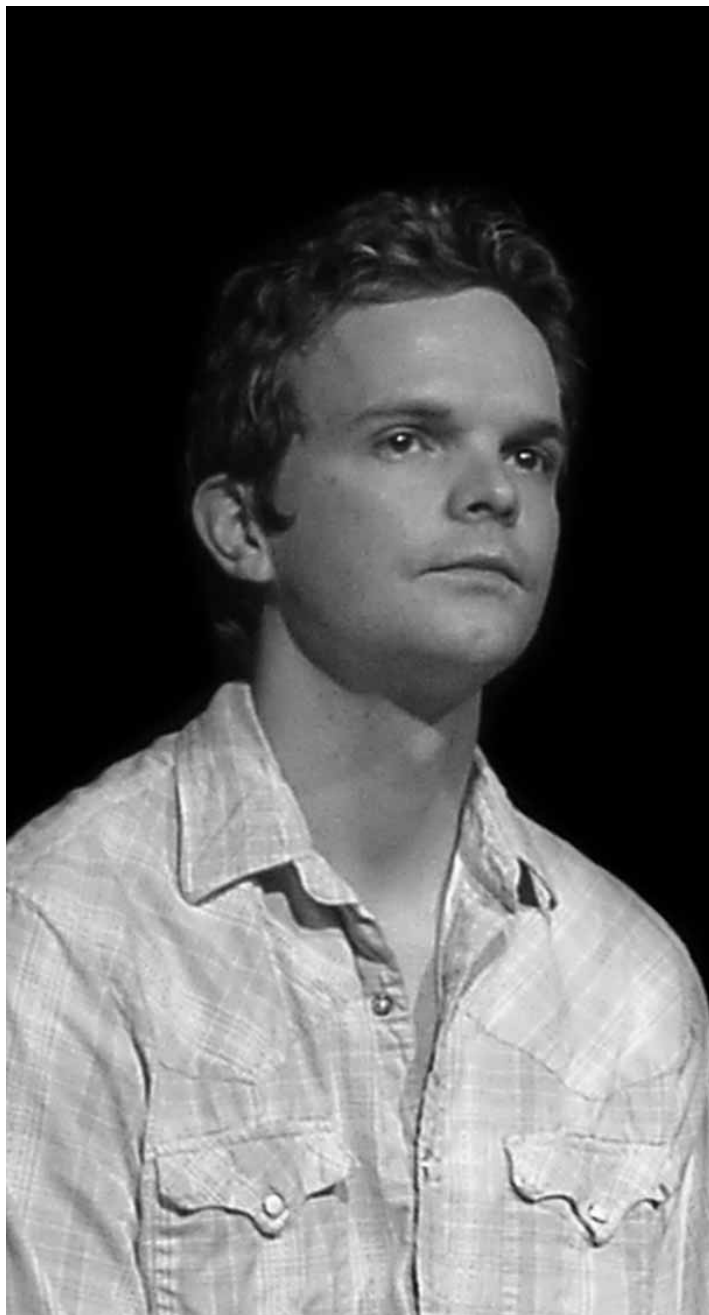
### Exercise:

- Introduce the idea of personal things that we carry. We all have things that we brought with us to school today (both literal and figurative).
- Ask students to create two lines on opposite sides of the room, facing each other. Explain that they should cross the room and stand on the opposite line if the statement applies to them. This game should be done silently.

- Cross the room if you carried a back-pack to school today.
- Cross the room if you carried a lunch to school today.
- Cross the room if you carried make-up to school today.
- Cross the room if you carried homework to school today.
- Cross the room if you carried half-finished homework to school today.
- Cross the room if you carried a picture of a relative to school today.
- Cross the room if you carried a video game to school today.
- Cross the room if you carried a good luck charm to school today.

*(With the following more figurative “things” the students “carry,” ask them to show us what they are carrying through their walk-walk with sleepiness, hunger, guilt, etc.)*

- Cross the room if you carried sleepiness to school today.
  - Cross the room if you carried hunger to school today.
  - Cross the room if you carried excitement to school today.
  - Cross the room if you carried guilt to school today.
  - Cross the room if you carried silliness to school today.
  - Cross the room if you carried shame to school today.
  - Cross the room if you carried your reputation to school today.
  - Cross the room if you carried fear to school today.
- Discuss some of the things that we in this room are carrying. Do we see any similarities between what we carry and what Tim O’Brien and other soldiers carried? Why do these similarities exist? Or why don’t they?



## Tableau (Frozen Picture, Still Image)

**Objective:** Students will create a visual image of the literal/figurative meaning of the word “carrying” in Tim O’Brien’s world.

### Exercise:

- Break into groups of 4 or 5 (count off).
- Within their groups, ask students to decide on one thing (either literal or figurative) that came up today as something that either we carried or that Tim O’Brien carried.
- Demonstrate the concept of “tableau”- a still image created by the students’ bodies that is completely frozen.
- Explain that groups will have a short amount of time to create an image of one of these things that people can carry. Everyone should be involved in the picture. The pictures can be realistic or abstract. Different actors can represent characters, objects, settings, etc.
- Circulate in the room to help with creation of tableaux.
- Present tableaux one by one, by having the class yell in unison “1-2-3 picture” as each group freezes into place.
- Ask the group to hold their positions and ask the class to reflect on it.
- **Discuss:** What do we think they are “carrying” in this frozen image? What do we see? How can you tell? What helps us to know what’s going on in the picture?
- Have each group reveal what they were going for in their frozen image.

**Closure:** In a circle, each students says “one thing I will be **carrying** away with me today is...”

“THE STUDENTS RAVED ALL THE WAY BACK TO THE DORM AND THE NEXT MORNING THEY WERE STILL HAVING A LIVELY DEBATE. IT’S A CLICHÉ TO SAY THE PERFORMANCE BROUGHT HISTORY TO LIFE FOR THEM, BUT IT REALLY IS TRUE IN THIS CASE.”

-FRANCES OWENS, TEACHER, U.S SENATE PAGE SCHOOL

The following exercises are designed to be used BEFORE or AFTER seeing the play!

## Section 2: The World of *The Things They Carried*

The following is an excerpt from *The Things They Carried*.

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### Discuss

**Objective:** The students will be introduced to text from *The Things They Carried*.

*"In June of 1968, a month after graduating from Macalester College, I was drafted to fight a war I hated. I was twenty-one years old. Young, yes, and politically naïve, but even so the American war in Vietnam seemed to me wrong. Certain blood was being shed for uncertain reasons. I saw no unity of purpose, no consensus on matters of philosophy or history or law. The very facts were shrouded in uncertainty: Was it a civil war? A war of national liberation or simple aggression? Who started it, and when, and why? What really happened to the USS Maddox on that dark night in the Gulf of Tonkin? Was Ho Chi Minh a Communist stooge, or a nationalist savior, or both, or neither? What about the Geneva Accords? What about SEATO and the Cold War? What about dominoes? America was divided on these and a thousand other issues, and the debate had spilled out across the floor of the United States Senate and into the streets, and smart men in pinstripes could not agree on even the most fundamental matters of public policy. The only certainty that summer was moral confusion.*

*At some point in mid-July I began thinking seriously about Canada. The border lay a few hundred miles north, an eight-hour drive. Both my conscience and my instincts were telling me to make a break for it, just take off and run like hell and never stop. In the beginning the idea seemed purely abstract, the word Canada printing itself out in my head; but after a time I could see particular shapes and images, the sorry*

*details of my own future—a hotel room in Winnipeg, a battered old suitcase, my father's eyes as I tried to explain myself over the telephone. I could almost hear his voice, and my mother's. Run, I'd think. The I'd think, Impossible. Then a second later I'd think, Run.*

*It all seemed crazy and impossible. Twenty-one years old, an ordinary kid with all the ordinary dreams and ambitions, and all I wanted was to live the life I was born to—a mainstream life—I loved baseball and hamburgers and cherry Cokes—and now I was off on the margins of exile, leaving my country forever, and it seemed so impossible and terrible and sad.*

*All those eyes on me—the town, the whole universe—and I couldn't risk the embarrassment. It was as if there were an audience to my life, that swirl of faces along the river, and in my head I could hear people screaming at me. Traitor! They yelled. I couldn't tolerate it. I couldn't endure the mockery, or the disgrace, or the patriotic ridicule. Even in my imagination, the shore just twenty yards away, I couldn't make myself be brave. It had nothing to do with morality. Embarrassment, that's all it was.*

*And right then I submitted.*

*I would go to the war—I would kill and maybe die—because I was embarrassed not to."*

### Questions for Discussion:

- Put yourself in Tim O'Brien's shoes. Do you think his decision to fight in a war he didn't agree with was the right thing to do?
- Is running away a common reaction to difficult situations? If so, what kind of relief is gained from running away?
- If not, what are other coping methods people may use?
- What does "war" mean to Tim O'Brien?
- What does "war" mean to you?

## Conflicting Feelings

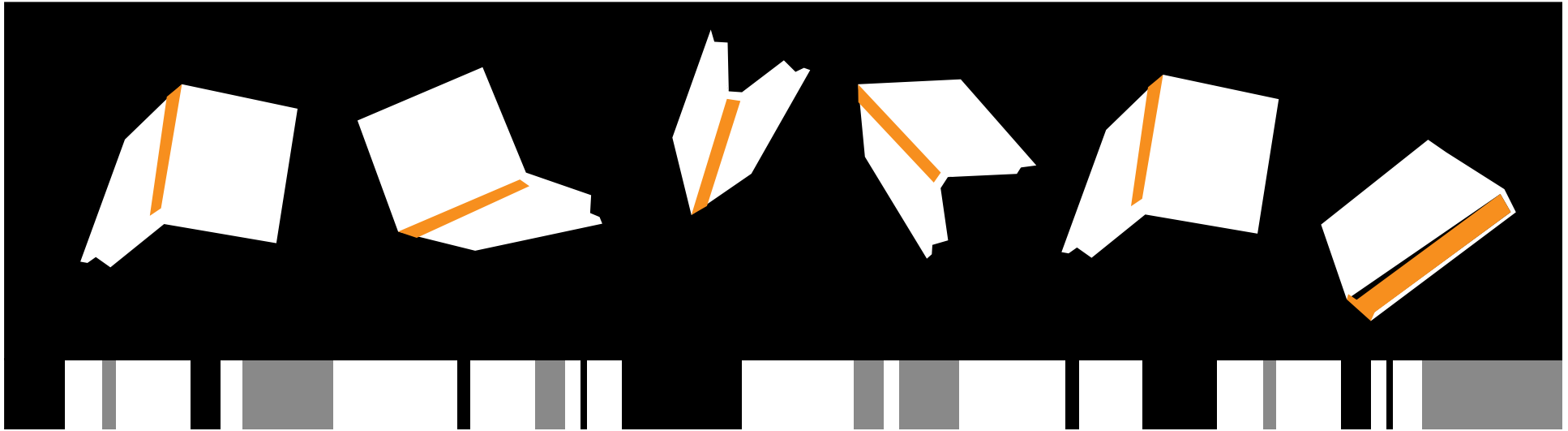
**Objective:** The students will experientially and metaphorically feel Tim O'Brien's conflict.

### Exercise:

- Ask students to find a place in the room so that they are equidistant from each other—not too close to or too far from anyone else; equally spread around the space. This exercise will require a lot of movement.
- Introduce the idea of Tim O'Brien's dilemma when he received his draft notice. His dilemma was between *going to war* and *escaping to Canada*. What would they do if they received a draft notice to go to war today? Remember, that there are no wrong answers. Allow the students to discuss this dilemma honestly.
- Ask the students to choose someone in the room who will represent *Escape* and someone who will represent *War*, without revealing it to anyone else.
- First, without revealing who their representatives are, the students' goals should be to get as close as possible to the person representing *War* and stay far away from the person representing *Escape*. How do they feel being so close to "war"? Do they fear for their lives?
- Now, they should switch—try to get as close as possible to *Escape* and stay far away from *War*. How does it feel being so close to "escaping"? Do they feel that they are letting down their duty to this country?
- In some ways O'Brien was equally torn between both options. Ask students to try and keep equidistant from both *Escape* and *War*.

"The thing about a story is that you dream it as you tell it, hoping that others might then dream along with you, and in this way memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head."

~ *The Things They Carried*, page 230



## The Vietnam War Timeline

### *Selected Highlights*

#### **Objective:**

The students will know basic facts about the Vietnam War.

#### **Exercise:**

*The Things They Carried* takes place during the Vietnam War. Please review the highlights of the Vietnam War with your students and ask the students to research and present one event from the list below to the class.

1941 Communist activist Ho Chi Minh secretly returns to Vietnam after 30 years in exile and organizes a nationalist organization known as the Viet Minh (Vietnam Independence League). After Japanese troops occupy Vietnam during World War II, the U.S. military intelligence agency Office of Strategic Services (OSS) allies with Ho Chi Minh and his Viet Minh guerrillas to harass Japanese troops in the jungles and to help rescue downed American pilots.

1950 President Truman sends 35-man military advisory group to aid French fighting to maintain colonial power in Vietnam.

1954 After defeat of French at Dien Bien Phu, Geneva Agreements provide for withdrawal of French and Vietminh to either side of demarcation zone pending reunification elections, which are never held. Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy send civilian advisers and, later, military personnel to train South Vietnamese.

1960-1963 U.S. military advisers in South Vietnam rise from 900 to 15,000.

1964 North Vietnamese torpedo boats reportedly attack U.S. destroyers in Gulf of Tonkin. President Johnson orders retaliatory air strikes. Congress approves Gulf of Tonkin resolution authorizing president to take "all necessary measures" to win in Vietnam, allowing for the war's expansion.

1965 U.S. planes begin combat missions over South Vietnam. In June, 23,000 American advisers committed to combat. By end of year over 184,000 U.S. troops in area.

1966 B-52s bomb DMZ, reportedly used by North Vietnam for entry into South.

1967 South Vietnam National Assembly approves election of Nguyen Van Thieu as president.

1968 U.S. has almost 525,000 men in Vietnam. In My Lai massacre, American soldiers kill 300 Vietnamese villagers. President Johnson orders halt to U.S. bombardment of North Vietnam. Saigon and N.L.F. join U.S. and North Vietnam in Paris peace talks.

1969 President Nixon announces Vietnam peace offer and begins troop withdrawals. Ho Chi Minh, 79, North Vietnam president, dies and collective leadership chosen. Some 6,000 U.S. troops pulled back from Thailand and 1,000 marines from Vietnam

1970 U.S. troops invade Cambodia in order to destroy North Vietnamese sanctuaries.





1971 Congress bars use of combat troops, but not air power, in Laos and Cambodia. South Vietnamese troops, with U.S. air cover, fail in Laos thrust. Many American ground forces withdrawn from Vietnam combat. New York Times publishes Pentagon papers, classified material on expansion of war.

1972 President Nixon responds to North Vietnamese drive across DMZ by ordering mining of North Vietnam ports and heavy bombing of Hanoi-Haiphong area and orders "Christmas bombing" of North to get North Vietnamese back to conference table.

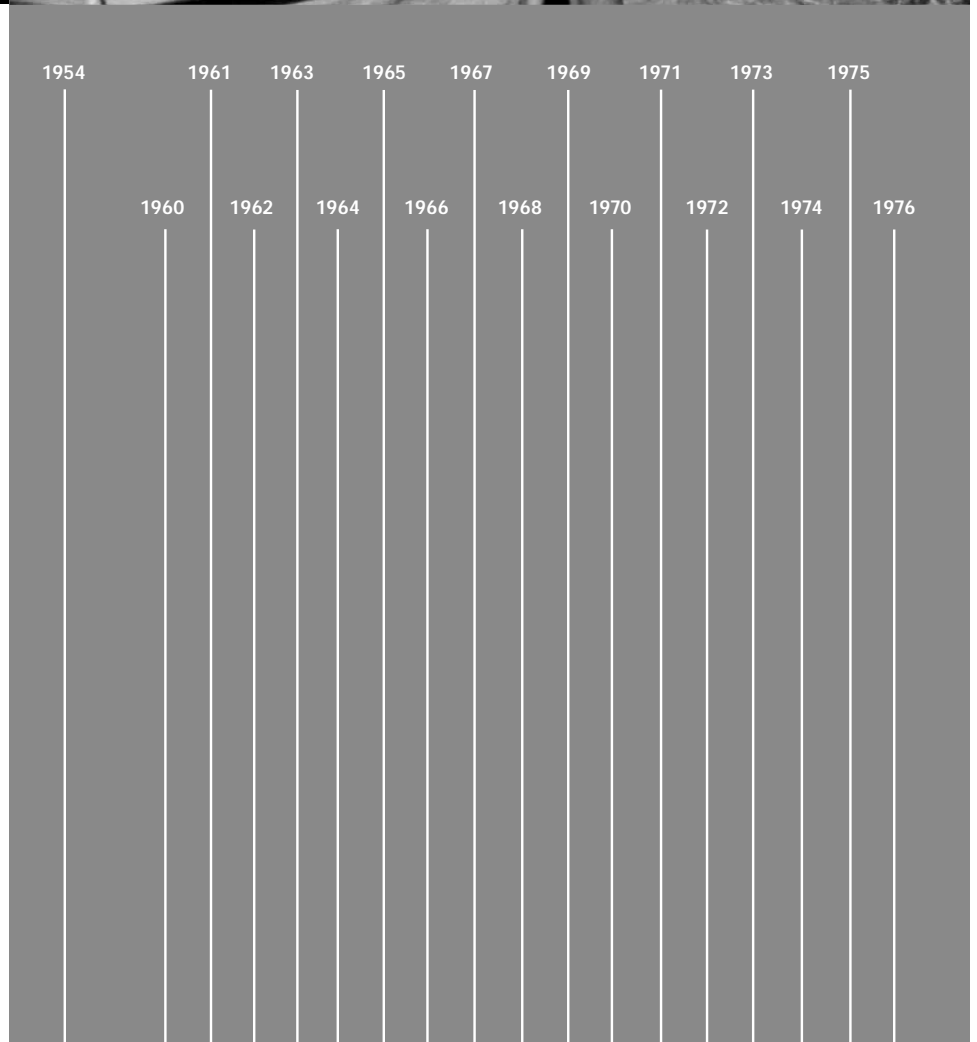
1973 President orders halt to offensive operations in North Vietnam. Representatives of North and South Vietnam, U.S., and N.L.F. sign peace pacts in Paris, ending longest war in U.S. history. Last American troops departed in their entirety.

1974 Both sides accuse each other of frequent violations of cease-fire agreement.

1975 Full-scale warfare resumes. South Vietnamese government surrenders to North Vietnam; U.S. Marine embassy guards and U.S. civilians and dependents evacuated. More than 140,000 Vietnamese refugees leave by air and sea, many to settle in U.S. Provisional Revolutionary Government takes control.

1976 Election of National Assembly paves way for reunification of North and South.

*Adapted from [www.infoplease.com](http://www.infoplease.com)*



The following exercises are designed to be used AFTER seeing the play!

## Section 3: Post-show Activities

### Role on the Wall of Tim O'Brien

**Objective:** The students will explore the internal and external worlds of Tim O'Brien.

- On a large piece of white paper, draw an outline of a person. This outline will represent Tim O'Brien. (A good way to do this is to have someone lie on a large piece of paper on the floor; trace around their body with a marker and you will have a life-size body outline.) Tape the outline to the wall and provide all of the students with colored markers. First direct the students to only write inside the boundaries of the body outline—on the inside they are to write words or phrases that represent the internal world of Tim O'Brien, including his thoughts, feelings, secrets, emotions, hopes, dreams, fears, etc.
- After about five minutes of writing on the interior of the body, direct the students to now write only on the outside of the boundaries. Explain that on the outside of the body they should write words or phrases that pertain to the external world of Tim O'Brien—such as what other people think of him, what he shows to the world, external influences, physical appearance, outside pressures, attitude, etc. After about five more minutes of writing, have the students read aloud some of the words and phrases that were written in the internal and external worlds. (You can also have students individually or in pairs draw a mini outline of a body on a small piece of paper and hang the final outlines on the wall. Students can also choose to decorate the body and draw images—perhaps the ones that are difficult to express in words or short phrases)

**Discussion:**

- Which words in Tim O'Brien's internal world are similar to the ones written in the external world? Which words are different?
- Did Tim show the world how he felt inside? Why or why not?
- Are there conflicting words within Tim's internal world? Did anyone know about them?
- Are there conflicting words within Tim's external world?
- What external/internal factors were pulling him in different directions?
- Did Tim's external world influence his internal world? Did the internal world influence his external?
- Why did Tim have to keep his internal and external worlds separate?



### Labels

**Objective:** The students will relate to the conflicting emotions Tim O'Brien experienced.

Write the following commands on labels or sticky notes. Each label should read something different, such as the following:

Doubt me	Agree with me	Ignore me	Respect me
Ridicule me	Fear me	Pamper me	Adore me

Place the labels on the students' backs. The students should not be aware of what their label says. However, all participants can read the labels of others. Pick a topic for discussion. The students must react to a person according to what the label on his/her back reads. After the students have had time to interact with one another, ask them how they felt and what they learned about themselves through interaction based on labels.

**Discussion:** How does this exercise relate to *The Things They Carried*? What feelings came out when you were treated in a certain way that are similar to how Tim O'Brien may have felt?



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## What to Do After You See the Performance

Please encourage your students to reflect on the play in some of the following ways. We would love to have copies of some of the writings or artwork your students create!

### Write

- Write a review of the *Things They Carried* as if you were a journalist or news reporter.
- Write a letter to the actor, director, or teaching artist in response to the play.
- Write a letter to Tim O'Brien in response to the novel.
- Write a monologue as Tim O'Brien, demonstrating the conflicting feelings he experienced.
- Write an epilogue. For example, what happens to Tim O'Brien after the story ends.
- Research the life of Tim O'Brien. How much of the novel is based on his real life and experiences? How much is fiction? Write an essay about your findings.

### Draw

- Draw images from the production.
- Draw a poster for our production of *The Things They Carried*
- Create a collage of images from magazines in response to the play.
- Draw a timeline of the Vietnam War or of Tim O'Brien's life.

Wynn Handman, Artistic Director/Co-Founder

David Kener, Executive Director

Jennifer Barnette, Managing Director

Jillian Mojica, Office Manager

Adi Ortner, Arts Education Associate